

First Opinion: A Charming Start for The Chain of Charms Series

Forsyth, Kate. *The Gypsy Crown*. Sydney, Australia: Pan Macmillan, 2006.

Adriana L. Medina

Kate Forsyth's first novel in The Chain of Charms series, *The Gypsy Crown*, is the beginning of what promises to be an exciting and adventurous sequence of quests. In order to save the other members of their tribe from being hanged, the main characters, Emilia and her cousin Luka, must avoid being captured and travel in secrecy to gather a series of charms that gypsy lore reveals have been distributed among other gypsy tribes. Each of the six charms, safeguarded by one family member, has special meaning, protection, and power, and, as the story goes, the charms are most powerful and fortuitous when brought together as they once were, an unbroken chain of charms.

As the first of six novels in the series, there are many characters, both fictional and historical, as well as animals, to be introduced to and keep track of. Therefore, the introduction is lengthy and the action does not get underway until about midway through the almost 200-page novel. Fortunately, Forsyth provides a list of the characters and their relationships with each other at the beginning of the novel. Also, to aid in keeping track of the action, a map of the setting is provided.

Although the book is classified as fantasy, it has historical elements of seventeenth-century Britain. Forsyth does a fine job of weaving historical figures and events into the plot, especially unlikely figures such as gypsies, who are not often presented as protagonists in novels. While some of the gypsies reinforce stereotypes, such as those portrayed as fortune-tellers, the novel also demonstrates how gypsies were misunderstood and feared. To aid in comprehending gypsies in the context of history and to help in distinguishing fact from fiction, the author has included a section on the historical facts underlying the characters and events at the novel's end. Terms and traditions of the time period are interspersed throughout the novel (for example, gaol, Rom, morris dancers, Roundheads, Maypole) and these enhance the story. Although a glossary is not provided, all the words are well couched in context and can be discerned by a proficient reader or with the help of a reliable resource.

Overall, as it stands alone, the novel is educational and interesting. Educationally, this novel could be used as an introduction to or in conjunction with a unit on seventeenth-century Britain or gypsies. Recreationally, it provides an enjoyable, quick, interesting, and educational reading experience. I can only imagine that the rest of the series will continue to provide a charming reading experience for both young adults and adults alike. I'm already on the quest for Book 2!

About the Author

Adriana L. Medina is Assistant Professor at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Her areas of interest are adolescent literacy, teacher education, and educational program evaluation. She is an avid reader of young adult literature because she intends to remain, if nothing else, young at heart!

Second Reaction: Being Charmed by Fantasy

Forsyth, Kate. *The Gypsy Crown*. Sydney, Australia: Pan Macmillan, 2006.

Kate Smith

Not just any ordinary chain of charms that one might purchase in a jewelry shop, the chain of charms in *The Gypsy Crown* must be found, earned, and then brought together to unravel real magic. This first book in a six-book series, *The Chain of Charms*, will have children and adults alike gobbling up the words, themes, historical facts, mystery, and adventures as they would devour a hot apple pie on a cold winter's night. Sheer exhaustion sets in from reading the variety of escapes and ongoing cross-country hi-jinks. Readers can easily relate with the characters and the family connections, the rules that must be obeyed (or not) in this time.

One particular highlight for me, not being well versed in seventeenth-century English history, was the clever attention to the real life of the characters. It made me sit up and really think about what it would be like to catch a fish, scale, cook, and eat bare handed, even to build a fire. With frequent pauses I reflected on those times and today's indulgent life. It was an unexpected treasure in reading this book. The journey also took me along an emotion scale from utter misery to sheer jubilation; I was treated to a feast of resilience pie. Many marvellous messages of hope and trust were handed to me on a silver platter.

My emotional intelligence was certainly tapped into. I became empathetic to the characters, the time, and the horrendous conditions they encountered. I also recognized the hero status of Luka and Emilia, their resilience, and how they bounced back in times of adversity. I hope that children who read *The Gypsy Crown* will identify with these qualities and make parallels to their own life.

I would love to use this book in a class of high-school students plotting sequences in a triple timeline: a historical line, a lifestyle line, and a resilience line. I would explore with teenagers the concepts of family, honor, and resilience. We could simulate sections of the book and make comparisons between life in 1658 and today. The story invites and challenges us to think about how we would survive in those conditions.

The title intrigued me. What relevance was the title to the story yet to unfold? Jewelry lovers across the world will appreciate how thrilling it is to build upon a charm bracelet, but even better to have a tremendous journey along the way! The final line, referencing "the charm of the silver horse" (195) gives us a glimpse of what we are searching for in the following book in the series.

Passionate readers will devour this book and want to start others in the series, discovering the meaning of each trinket, but more importantly, what adventures the two daring children, the mischievous monkey, the faithful dog, and the dancing bear will be caught up in.

The author successfully establishes a strong foundation for the following books. I have become familiar with the characters; I feel for them and want them to succeed. I am excited about discovering, with Luka and Emilia, the other charms: the silver horse, the herb of grace, the cat's eye shell, the lightning bolt, and the butterfly in amber. Even more, I want to discover the ending. I have been "charmed."

About the Author

Kate Smith is an experienced teacher who is currently the deputy principal in a suburban school in Canberra, Australia. She is as at home in the year 10 classroom as she is in the kindergarten. Her ethos is "kids first, last, and always" and she has a particular passion and affinity for those with special needs.